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UNCORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

TRANSCRIPT OF SPECIAL NEWS BRIEFING

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 1978
10:00 A.M.
(ON THE RECORD UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED)

MR. RESTON: All right, ladies and gentlemen. First of all, let me apolize for being late. I have a statement to be read here, part of which has been handed out to you but part of which has not, and I would like to head through it.

The Department of State is shocked and deeply sorrowed by yesterday's tragic events at Port Kaituma, Guyana, which resulted in the deaths of Congressman Leo Ryan of the State of California and several others in his party, including members of a National Broadcasting Company news team and a photographer for the San Francisco Examiner.

Our Ambassador to Guyana, Mr. John Burke, has been in direct and continous touch with Prime Minister Burnham of Guyana and other officials of the Guyanese Government who are similarly shocked and are taking all possible steps to apprehend the perpetrators of this crime.

Congressman Ryan died trying to assist several Americans who apparently wanted to leave the religious community in Guyana.

Perhaps no lengthy eulogy is necessary other than to emphasize that Congressman Ryan died doing what he believed was the most important thing a Congressman or, indeed, any Government official could do -- that is, trying to help our citizens.

We also express our deepest condolences to the families of the journalists from the National Broadcasting Company and from the San Francisco Examiner who died while pursuing their profession in the highest traditions of American journalism.

The United States Government will continue to monitor this situation around the clock in order to provide all possible assistance to the Americans involved and to promptly respond to any requests for support from the Guyanese Government.

Now, I have a bit of a factual report for you here, and then I'd be happy to take any questions which you may have which are not covered by the various statements I will be making.

MS. SCHUKER: She is a legislative assistant to Congressman Ryan.

A I understand that she was on Congressman Ryan's staff.

And Mr. Antony Katsaris.

We have reports of two other unidentified victims who were injured.

Q Wait a minute; that's five.

Q Just Dwyer.

Q Including Dwyer. I'm sorry. Yes.

A No information has been received thus far about the extent of the injury of some of these wounded individuals. The Embassy still has not been able to confirm the reports which have been circulating that there may have been mass suicides. However, our Ambassador was assured by the Guyanese authorities that their forces would be getting to Jonestown, which is the location of the camp, as quickly as possible in order to determine what the situation on the ground is there.

We have been identifying next of kin.

I think the events transpired in the following manner, as best we have been able to piece it together during the early evening and late night and early morning

Ambassador Burke informed a State Department Task Force that an Embassy Officer who accompanied the Guyanese authorities into Port Kaituma has confirmed the deaths of five members of the party traveling with Congresman Ruyan: Congressman Ryan, Mr. Robert Brown of the National Broadcasting Company, Mr. Donald Harris of the National Broadcasting Company, Mr. Gregory Robinson -- a photographer for the San Francisco Examiner. There has also been another death, a death of an American female -- who I am not in a position to identify for you at the moment.

The Embassy in Georgetown has reported that six persons were injured, including our Deputy Chief of Mission -- Mr. Richard Dwyer -- who was slightly wounded.

Q Slightly, you say?

A Slightly injured.

It is my understanding Mr. Dwyer is ambulatory.

Other injured members traveling with Congressman Ruan are Jackie Speiers, Mr. Steven Sung of the National Broadcasting Company.

Q Who is Jackie Speiers?

A I'm sorry; I do not have an identification for Jackie Speiers. I will try to get that for you.

hours:

At approximately 6:30 p.m., Eastern Standard Time, on November 18th, Embassy Georgetown reported in a flash cable to the Department of State that a delegation accompanying Congressman Ryan had apparently been attacked and struck by gunfire while returning from the Peoples Temple Agricultural Community in the remote northwest interior of Guyana in South America.

Let me show you on the map where these places are.

(Map.)

The capital is Georgetown, located on the coast here.

Approximately here is Port Kaituma, which is the nearest airstrip to Jonestown -- which is the location of the camp.

Congressman Leo Ryan, who is a Democrat of California, had traveled to Guyana to investigate allegations by relatives that some members of the Peoples Temple Community were being held against their will. Ryan was accompanied by a number of journalists -- including a television camera crew from the National Broadcasting

Company based out of San Francisco, as well as other journalists. He was also accompanied by the Deputy Chief of Mission of our Embassy in Georgetown -- Mr. Richard Dwyer -- and he was accompanied by Mr. Lane, Esquire, and another attorney, who are counsel for the Peoples Temple.

The group traveled to Port Kaituma, which is the nearest airstrip to the Peoples Temple Community. It is about 145 miles northwest of Georgetown. The group traveled by chartered aircraft on the afternoon of November 17th. They spent the night at Jonestown -- the night of November 17th to the 18th. They returned to the airstrip at Kaituma on the afternoon of November 18th. They were accompanied by some six to ten members of the Peoples Temple Community who apparently wished to leave the Community. The party was in the act of boarding two chartered aircraft which had been obtained for the trip back to Georgetown when one of the supposed members of the Community who wished to leave produced a gun and began to shoot at others who were leaving. This was in the smaller of two aircraft on the field at that time.

This aircraft I am speaking of quickly emptied,

except for a young woman who was seriously wounded.

At about the same time, a flatbed trailer pulled by a tractor appeared on the airstrip. A number of people in the trailer opened fire on Congressman Ryan and his immediate party, who were in the process of boarding the second aircraft. The gunfire also disabled this aircraft so that it could not take off.

The first aircraft took off with its own crew, the young woman who had been wounded, and the aircrew of the second aircraft; and they scrambled aboard at the last minute.

Early reports on these events were unclear and based entirely on the account of the incident which was given by the two aircrews when they returned to Georgetown.

The Government of Guyana reacted swiftly under the personal direction of its Prime Minister. Unfortunately, the incident at Port Kaituma took place at sundown. Hence, it was impossible for the Guyanese reaction forces to go there directly because the airstrip at Port Kaituma is unlighted. There are no night landing lights.

The Guyanese forces proceeded to establish themselves at an airstrip called Mathews Ridge, which is about 30 miles from Port Kaituma (indicating on map), where the incident took place. Their intention was to move into the area at first light. Our Ambassador in Georgetown has been in constant and continuing touch with the Prime Minister and with various organs of his government, including the security forces.

A crisis management team was immediately formed here in the Department of State under the direction of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs -- Mr. Brandon Grove -- and the Director of the Office for Caribbean Affairs -- Mr. Ashley Hewitt. The White House Situation Room and the National Military Command Center were immediately informed, as was the Deputy Secretary of State -- Mr. Warren Christopher -- the National Security Council, and the Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations -- Mr. Douglas Bennet. The National Military Command Center agreed to provide a C-141 medical evacuation aircraft with full medical complement. In addition to the full medical complement, our Embassy had requested a medical pathologist to be

on board, and there was one on board. The aircraft originally left McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey and stopped off in Charleston, South Carolina, leaving there at 3:00 a.m., Eastern Standard Time, and arrived about 8:00 o'clock in the morning at Georgetown -- and that's Eastern Standard Time.

As of 6:00 o'clock this morning, Eastern Standard Time, there are sketchy reports of casualties; but I have previously confirmed for you that Congressman Ryan is reported -- and that report, unfortunately, is confirmed -- that he has been killed -- along with the other people whose names I mentioned, in addition to the one additional American female national.

In addition, I want to report that there are reports -- as yet unconfirmed -- that members of the Peoples Temple Community in Guyana are perhaps engaging in mass suicides. The Guyanese police in Georgetown report that a woman who ran the Peoples Temple office there has killed her three children and taken her own life.. Another Peoples Temple member, who says he escaped from the Community and walked 20 miles to Mathews Ridge, reported that some 200 members of that Community had already taken their lives when he was leaving.

I want to emphasize to you that we have not confirmed these reports.

There are approximately 1100 United States citizens resident at the Temple Community -- the Peoples Temple Community. In addition, the possibility exists that Peoples Temple members here in the United States who number some 3,000 -- mostly resident in the State of California -- may also begin to take their own lives.

The State Department Task Force has been in touch with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the police departments of the Cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles, California -- this was at about 2:30 this morning, Eastern Standard Time -- to inform them of this possibility.

Q Tom, did the State Department inform the police of this responsibility?

A Yes.

Q Why would the State Department know more about this than the police in California, who presumably have greater contact with them?

A Well, I think that the reason is that probably we have had greater contact with the members of the

Temple in Guyana as opposed to California.

Let me just finish up here and then I'll take any questions you may have.

Our Ambassador -- Mr. John Burke -- has made clear to Prime Minister Burnham of Guyana are the following -- and I may say that we have ever indication that the Government of Guyana is cooperating splendidly.

- We want to make sure that every effort is made to get into Port Kaituma to furnish aid, assistance, and protection to Americans who may still be there.

- Second, we want to see that the injured are brought out to Georgetown as soon as possible.

- And, third, of course: the perpetrators of this crime and this outrage be brought to justice as soon as possible.

Let me say, finally, that this has been a very sad situation. It has created enormous and understandable humanitarian interest. And in order to deal with the situation as humanely and as efficiently as possible, additional personnel from the Department of State are being airlifted into Georgetown to help deal with the situation. They are coming from Panama, from Venezuela, and from Trinidad.

Do you have questions?

Q Tom, do we have --

Q I'd like to ask you if --

Q Do we have a treaty with Guyana?

A I'll take that question.

Q Tom, could you clear up one thing? You said there were five dead. Can you say that the fifth dead is not one of the people you're listing as wounded -- just so that we don't go out with a report saying somebody's who wounded is in fact dead?

A Yes.

Q The person -- the fifth dead person -- is not one of those you're listing as wounded --

A That is correct.

Q -- not the woman in the plane and not Jackie Speiers.

A That is correct.

Q Tom, do I understand you to say that nothing is being done by our Government in a way to try to prevent any further mass suicides by the members of this group?

A No; that is incorrect to state that.

First of all, we have informed the authorities in San Francisco and in Los Angeles about this possibility; and we hope that the authorities in San Francisco and Los Angeles will take steps which will help prevent such an occurrence.

Second of all, we are making every effort to assist the Guyanese forces, who are at this time on their way to Jonestown, to assess the situation in order -- hopefully -- to prevent such an occurrence.

Q Tom --

A Yes.

Q -- do you have anything further on the whereabouts of Mark Lane or is it being assumed that he was one of those led into the bush?

A We have no information about the present physical situation or status of Mr. Lane. What we are really engaged in here -- here in Washington -- and the burden is falling primarily on the Guyanese authorities, the Guyanese police and the Guyanese security forces -- is to get into the area where the incident took place at Port Kaituma and also to get into the area at Jonestown, where the Community is resident. And I gather it takes

about 20 minutes over a dirt road to get from the airport at Port Kaituma to the Jonestown Community.

To establish just exactly what the facts are -- what happened, who survived, who is in need of medical attention, where they are -- we just don't have enough reporting at this time. It is my understanding that Guyanese forces in company strength -- which I gather is about 150 personnel -- are on the way there now.

Q Tom, according to --

Q What is the state of your information here? As near as I can tell, you've had no direct contact with this group since the smaller aircraft got out and yet you're able to confirm deaths and so forth. What has been the contact with that situation overnight, if any?

A Well, as I said before, the airstrip at Port Kaituma is an unlighted airstrip. It was impossible to get into the airstrip during the night. Dawn came about 5:00 a.m. this morning, and at that point the beginnings of the Guyanese forces were able to get in there; and so our reports come from the Guyanese authorities, but we have not had --

Q Tom, is that strip --

A Excuse me, John -- if I could finish.

Q Yes.

A We have not had a full assessment from the Guyanese authorities nor from our own personnel.

Q Just --

A Yes, John.

Q -- to follow that up, you don't have a report that two Guyanese helicopters were sent there during the night and that there were --

A That is not my information.

Q So where does the confirmation come from, Tom?

A The confirmation comes from Guyanese authorities who are beginning to get into the area.

Q But according to your count, Tom, you give us five members of the delegation have died, six persons were injured. According to your count, how many are unaccounted for?

A I have an unofficial passenger list here of those who went in on the aircraft with Congressman Ryan: the Congressman, a Miss Jackie Speier, Mark Lane,

Charles Garry -- who is also an attorney, I gather, an attorney for the Peoples Temple -- Mr. Richard Dwyer, who I have previously mentioned is the Deputy Chief of Mission of our Embassy; Mr. Don Harris; Mr. Bob Flick of NBC-TV in San Francisco; Mr. Ron Javers of the San Francisco Chronicle; Mr. Tim Reiterman of the San Francisco Examiner; Mr. Charles Krouse of The Washington Post; Mr. Gregory Robinson, a photographer for the San Francisco Examiner; Mr. Steven Sung of NBC-TV; and Mr. Robert Brown, also obviously of NBC.

Also there were present a representative of the Ministry of Information of the Guyanese Government-- I do not have a name for you -- plus four, approximately four, people identified as relatives of members of the Peoples Temple Community. So the ones whose names I have not mentioned are still unaccounted for.

Q Tom --

Q How about all of these --

[Cont'd on pg. B-1.]

Q Tom, I wonder if I could pursue with you a question of what kind of advice was given to Congressman Ryan and his group before they left. Based on an answer that you have already given, you clearly had some experience with this commune, knew of them to be of a somewhat violent bent. Had, in fact, Congressman Ryan spoken to anyone here? Had you given him any advice with regard to going or not going?

A I believe the Congressman did receive a briefing prior to his trip to Guyana. He left here on the 14th of November, by the way. I do not -- and I wish to state this -- I do not have a characterization to offer you on the characteristics of the Peoples Temple.

Q Did the embassy in Guyana discourage --

Q What do you mean, you don't have a characterization? Here is an group about which you know enough that you can call up the FBI and the police officials in California to tell them that these people have threatened mass suicide if anyone tries to move against them, but you don't have any characterization of them?

A I think what we are most concerned with here, Ted, is the specific factual situation of what

happened during the shooting incident at Port Kaituma. I am not going to characterize thousands of members of a particular community. I will characterize the perpetrators of the crimes which apparently were committed there. But I will not characterize the entire sect or organization and every single member of it.

Q Tom, this characterization, the comment that you have in here about threatening mass suicide, I think what Ted is asking is, is that information that has come to you since the incident, or is it that since the incident you pulled that information out of a file?

A It is my understanding that there had been discussion of such a possibility prior to this incident taking place early yesterday afternoon by members of the community.

Q Tom, you seem to be drawing a line between the perpetrators and the Peoples Temple. Do you have any reason to believe that the individuals -- and also to the statement that says apparently members of the Peoples Temple -- do you have any reason to believe that the perpetrators may have been someone other than members of that sect?

A What I have reason to believe is that the invesitgation is prcceeding, that the Guyanese authorities are entering the area, that what we need to do most of all now is to find out what actually happened, and to protect and safeguard human lives.

Q Tom, do you know how many of the 1,100 people are children?

A I do not know. I will take that question.

Q Tom, can you run down the embassy --

Q Tom, I don't understand the list. Can we just nail down the list? The list is the names of the people who went in?

A The list I have just read to you is the unofficial passenger list of the chartered aircraft which went from Georgetown, Guyana, to the airstrip at Port Kaituma went on to Jonestown, Guyana, overnighted there, and came back to the airport at Port Kaituma, and were prepared to go back to Georgetown when the incident occurred.

Q Do you have the names of the members -- of the relatives?

A I have -- I am not in a position to identify them for you.

Q One more question. Do you have the name of the fifth person you believe is dead and you are withholding it because you have not notified relatives, or what?

A That is precisely correct.

Q Tom, can you account for us the role of the embassy in Georgetown from the time Ryan arrived? My understanding, and I want to be corrected on this if it is not correct, is that they strongly tried to discourage Ryan from making this trip.

A I don't have that precise a characterization for you. I know that Congressman Ryan received briefings here at the Department before he left the United States on November 14th. I know that when Congressman Ryan and his delegation arrived in Guyana, the embassy was supporting logistically his mission down there. I know that the Deputy Chief of Mission, who is the number two person in our embassy, accompanied Congressman Ryan and his party to Jonestown. But I do not have a characterization such as you describe.

Q Just to round this out a bit, do you know what kind of planes these were?

A It is my understanding that one of the planes was a Cessna. That is the smaller of the aircraft. I do not have the type or model or make of the larger aircraft, which I gather culd seat rather more people than the Cessna could.

Q What is the distance from Port Kaituma to Georgetwon, Tom, do you know?

A I don't know what the distance is. I think I previously said that it takes twenty minutes by jeep over a dirt road, which was made by the members of the Peoples Temple.

Now I want to say that this is in an area which is often subject to heavy rainfalls, and I do not know what the weather in Port Kaituma or in Jonestown is today, and therefore I cannot tell you how long it might take to travel that dirt road.

Q Tom, to make sure I have got one thing straight. You were saying that you are not prepared to say whether the State Department encouraged or discouraged the Congressman from making the trip in the first place in the briefing that he was given before he left here.

A That is precisely correct.

Q Tom, I just want to make sure I follow this thing correctly. You say that of the injured people, one was aboard the aircraft that left, a young woman.

A Yes, that is correct.

Q In other words, it doesn't say here, but I assume then that all of the other people who were injured spent the night out in this area in some way, and their status was determined in the morning when the first Guyanese forces arrived on the scene?

A You assume correctly, except that I want to add the caveat that we really do not have full reports yet, so I am not sure --

Q According to the best information you have now.

A That is correct.

Q Tom, is the total number eighteen? That is what I get from your listing who went in.

A I haven't counted them up here. The total number who might have been at the airport would include the total number who went in on the chartered aircraft, plus the six to ten who apparently wished to leave the community and exit from the area to go to Georgetown.

Q Tom, this question is not asked in an accusatory fashion at all, but I really don't understand why you cannot say whether Congressman Ryan and his party were encouraged or discouraged from making the trip. It seems to me that you had information available that would cause you to discourage him from making the trip. Did the Department not do so?

A I am not in a position to get into the content of our briefing of the Congressman.

Q Can you tell us whether or not there have been previous incidents involving Americans and the Peoples Temple in Port --

A In Jonestown?

Q In Guyana or wherever?

A Are you speaking of incidents of violence?

Q Incidents of any kind that would give you a background and an understanding of the Peoples Temple.

A I think I have indicated that the purpose which Congressman Ryan gave in going down to Guyana was that there had been reports by some relatives of the people who were resident at the Jonestown camp --

Q They were reports to the Congressman, were they not?

A The Congressman had received reports, apparently, from relatives of American citizens resident at Jonestown, Guyana, that they were being held there against their will. Now, that is a tort of a sort, and I think the Congressman was down there to investigate those allegations.

Q Had the State Department been aware of such allegations prior to yesterday's incidents?

A Yes. Allegations of being held there against their will.

Q You had gotten complaints directly from the parents, in other words?

A I believe so. If we had not had them directly from the parents -- I believe so. I think I can say that is correct.

Q Were these taken up, Tom, with the Government of Guyana, prior to this incident?

A We have discussed with the Government of Guyana the situation of some of these Americans in Jonestown.

Q Tom, has the Government of Guyana asked for your help in deporting this community?

A Not that I am aware of.

Q What does your previous answer mean, Tom, that you had discussed it with the Government of Guyana. It now seems as though we are doing nothing but throwing heaping praise on the Government of Guyana for their extraordinary cooperation in the past 24 hours.

A That is exactly what I am trying to do.

Q And what I would like to know is what kind of cooperation you received in the period prior to those 24 hours, and whether indeed the United States had asked for and received assistance in trying to find out whether American citizens were being held against their will by other American citizens?

A I am not sure that we have asked questions along those lines. We have discussed certain court proceedings in Guyana. For instance, as an example, child custody cases which were under the jurisdiction of the Guyanese courts. We have discussed judicial procedures in such cases with the Government of Guyana.

But, really, if the people resident at Jonestown were breaking no Guyanese law, that really is a matter for the Government of Guyana to decide.

Q Tom, can you tell us roughly how far back

it was before the State Department became aware of complaints involving this community, and also whether any representatives, consular officials or other representatives of our embassy in Georgetown had visited the community at any point?

A I cannot answer your first question because I do not know, but I can answer your second question, and the answer is that consular officials of the American Embassy in Guyana periodically had visited American citizens resident at Jonestown for normal consular types of purposes, such as, registration of births and general health inspections, the normal kinds of things that consular officers would do for American citizens resident abroad any place in the world.

Q What kind of health inspections are you talking about, Tom?

Q In other words, in no cases in connection with these complaints or there were no reports of somebody out there saying, "Help, I am being held against my will", or something like this?

A I am not aware of any.

Q What do you mean by health inspection, Tom? What is a healt inspection that you normally carry out?

A Maybe I should retract that. Maybe not. I retract the health inspections.

Q What do you mean by that?

A Well, I was trying to figure out examples of normal consular services, and I was incorrect. But I am correct as a normal consular service being the registration of birth.

Q Do you have anything on the kinds of weapons these people were attacked with? Were they hand guns, automatic, semi-automatic?

A I do not.

Q Tom, the C-141 medical evac plane, is it going to be coming back to the States carrying the wounded, and, if so, where is it going to be and when?

A That is unclear at this point. A decision will be made at the point of departure based on a number of factors.

First of all, the condition of the wounded on board the aircraft. In other words, how soon they need to reach medical attention in a hospital. Second of all, on the availability of jet fuel at Georgetown.

Those decisions have not been reached. I can

tell you that the options include going to Howard Air Force Base in Panama or coming directly back here to Andrews Air Force Base in suburban Maryland.

Q Do you know when you will have updated information?

A I wanted to ask you all about that? Would it be useful to you to have another briefing at four o'clock this afternoon should we have further reports from the Guyanese authorities at that time?

Q Yes. You will have further reports.

A Why don't we say, then, four o'clock this afternoon, if that is a mutually agreeable time.

Let me run through some other notes I have here to see whether there is anything else I can provide to you.

Q Tom, can you just clarify one thing on the C-141? Were there only med evac people on that, or were there also some State Department consular or any military people aboard that plane?

A I am aware of no State Department people who were on board that plane. It is with a medical complement; i.e., medical personnel along with a pathologist,

which was requested specifically by our embassy in Georgetown at the request of the Guyanese authorities.

Q Did they take any security?

A And I am not aware of any security which they may have taken on the plane.

Q So no American military personnel have been assigned?

A I believe this is an Air Force plane, and I would assume that it is being flown by the Air Force, and therefore there are military personnel on board. I will take the question as to whether any security personnel of the U.S. armed forces are on that plane. I am not aware of any.

Q Did I understand you correctly, if the C-141 takes off, medical needs and gas are such that it can get out, get farther away, will either go to Panama or here? There are no other -- ?

A I don't want to foreclose any option, but the contingency planning earlier this morning was that depending on the availability of jet fuel at Georgetown, and depending on the condition of the victims of this incident, that they would either go to Howard Air Force

Base in Panama or to Andrews Air Force Base here.

Q Is the preference to bring them here, Tom? Is that the first?

A That is a preference, but that is going to be totally subject to what the medical officers and logistical officers find in Georgetown.

Q When will you know that, because I think that would be a decision that we would like to know as early as possible?

A Yes, sir, I understand your interest in the matter. I do not know when we will know that. I think we will only know that shortly prior to the take-off of the aircraft, but we would be glad to post an estimated time of arrival and place of arrival, obviously of that C-141 medical evacuation.

Q Can you tell us how soon we will know whether there will be that four o'clock briefing.

A There will be the four o'clock briefing. We know now.

Can you hold on a moment? I have a further statement to make, not regarding Guyana. Can we see whether we can get the people back in the briefing room

who have left? This is a statement on another matter, but which we feel is important to make.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have a statement to make. Unfortunatley, I am in a position of not being able to be responsive to any follow-up questio- you may have on this statement, but I wish to make a statement for the record.

It is a statement on behalf of the Secretary of State, Mr. Cyrus Vance.

As President Carter has indicated, the United States does not intend to interfere in the internal affairs of any other country, and reports to the contrary are totally without foundation.

We expect other countries to conduct themselves in similar fashion, and we note that the Soviet Union has said yesterday that it will not interfere in the affairs of Iran and will respect its territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence.

As we have said, we firmly support the Shah in his efforts to restore domestic tranquility in Iran, and we have confidence that Iran can solve its own problems. We intend to preserve and pursue with Iran our strong bilateral political, economic and security relationship. Thank you.

Q Tom, will you be in a position to have any answers on that later in the day, or to be more responsive on that?

A I could be, yes. Let me ask Mr. Vance about it.

Q Thank you.

[The briefing concluded at 11:07 a.m.]